



Paths of glory

The Rt. Hon **Margaret Hodge** MBE MP, Minister for Culture, Creative Industries and Tourism, praises what Find Your Talent is achieving and how it can influence future possibilities for dance

When I left the Department for Culture, Media and Sport a year or so ago, the ten Find Your Talent pathfinders had only just started their journeys towards testing what a comprehensive, high-quality cultural offer for all children and young people might look like. I visited some of the pathfinders as part of their first birthday celebrations, and I've been hugely impressed by the ground that's been covered in such a short time.

I saw a stunning dance performance, choreographed and performed by GCSE students from Central Foundation Girls School in Bow, which is a key partner in the Tower Hamlets pathfinder in London. Talking with them afterwards, it was clear just how important the performance was to their lives, their development and their hopes and ambitions for the future. This encounter became yet another living example of why we support Find Your Talent. It's an offer that, I believe, will give young people sustained opportunities to create and participate in high-quality cultural experiences from their early years through their transition to adulthood, in and out of school.

When we launched the programme we were well aware that there was already a significant amount of central government funding for cultural education. And that this, in turn, was heavily supplemented by other provision in the private and voluntary sector, or by cultural programmes provided under the auspices of other government initiatives. Paradoxically, all of this, excellent though it was, did not translate 'on the ground' to anything approaching a systematic or coherent experience for all young people.

It's a guiding principle for me that these experiences are too important to be an accident of geography or the privilege of a minority. The year one evaluation of the programme tells us that over half of secondary aged pupils are already involved in five hours a week, which is both reassuring and worrying. It shows that we need to make special efforts to reach those children and young people who aren't engaged for one reason or another.

Our evaluation has already picked out what's known as the 'strategic added value' that the pathfinders are bringing to organisation and delivery at a local level. This matters because it can help lever in additional funding to culture from non-culture specific budgets. It also helps make the case for ongoing support from local councils because it helps town hall strategists to see culture as part of a bigger picture. I know this sounds like a lot of dreary bureaucratic nonsense, but my long experience in local government before becoming an MP taught me that it's only by matching what you want with existing policies and priorities that you ensure its sustained future.

It's reassuring, and not surprising, that dance is well represented across the ten pathfinders. As you might expect, much of this came about because dance infrastructure and investment was already in place. Undertaking a comprehensive needs assessment and audit was one of the first activities that the pathfinders carried out in order to better shape their offer. In the best examples, this resulted in a framework that ensured new services were commissioned to fill gaps and to reach new target audiences, rather than 'over-provide' to schools or groups of young people who were already beneficiaries. In North and South Shields this has led to the creation of a dance hub, in partnership with Youth Dance England and Dance City, which has a really good chance of securing a bright future.

One of the most impressive aspects of the pathfinders has been the extensive consultation with children and young people about what they currently do, and what they'd be interested in trying. I saw an impressive realisation of this when I visited the Shepway pathfinder. They consulted with 12,000 five to nineteen year olds in their area and identified significant gaps in either the provision or participation in certain activities. The pathfinder will now use their funding to help plug these holes.

It isn't just about interesting new partnerships with organisations as diverse as English National Ballet in Bolton, Breakin' Convention in Customs House and Dance United in Leeds. The pathfinders are also extending the reach of existing programmes. In Hampshire funding is being used to part-fund the tour of an existing youth dance group with the aim of encouraging more young people to take up dance.

We've learnt important lessons from Find Your Talent about how a future culture offer could be developed, and where some difficulties are. Building a highly skilled workforce, for example, is a challenge across all art forms and so I'm really pleased that the sector is working to develop a diploma for practitioners that will tackle head on the issue of creating a workforce that can deliver against our long-term ambition to offer all children and young people access to high-quality cultural activities.

I think that the future is positive for dance. Yes, there will be obstacles ahead, but I'm certain that dance is going to play a big part in our national cultural life in the years to come, and I want to make sure that those of us with the opportunity to support the sector do everything we can to make that happen.

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